

Bridgeport bridge may be saved from failing

Bridging the facts:

The Bridgeport bridge was constructed in 1862 by David Wood as part of the Virginia Turnpike.

Wood, an early entrepreneur who migrated from Virginia, charged miners a toll in exchange for a safe river crossing.

It is estimated to be 243 feet long.

The bridge is a classic example of the Howe truss, which uses fundamental concepts of Newtonian physics to utilize opposing forces to create a solid immobile structure with minimal use of materials.

The bridge's main support system is composed of two gigantic 5-by-14 inch Douglas fir timbers that rest on two granite abutments dug into both banks of the South Yuba River.

Steel and iron serve as the vertical bolstering system, while timber is used for lateral (wind) bracing. The "shake" roof and sides — composed of 27,000 5-inch wide by 36-inch long shingles cut from local sugar pine — were designed to protect the timber components from the elements.

The bridge was designated as a National Historic Site on July 14, 1971. California recognized the bridge as a registered landmark in 1947.

The Bridgeport bridge provides a link between western Nevada County's past and present, spanning the region's rich heritage as a fulcrum of the Gold Rush to its present role as a recreation destination replete with spectacular scenery.

But the bridge — the longest single-span, timber-constructed covered bridge in the United States — is failing, structurally deficient and susceptible to crumbling at the slightest provocation, officials said Thursday.

"It's bowing and it is failing," said Marilyn Linkem, superintendent of the Sierra District of the California State Parks Department. "Some of our engineers think it's an immediate threat. One heavy winter and it could break down."

Critical structural elements that bolster the 151-year old bridge are compromised, fractured and displaced to the point where State Parks deemed the structure unsafe for pedestrians in the autumn of 2011.

A consortium of local volunteers, nonprofits, public representatives and ordinary citizens is trying to raise the approximately \$1.1 million to make necessary repairs.

“The bridge is an icon that just can’t be lost,” said David Anderson, president of the South Yuba River State Park Association, a nonprofit organization that provides interpretative and financial support to the park. “It’s beautiful, obviously. It’s wonderful to walk out to the middle of the bridge and look up and down the river.”

Anderson’s campaign has progressed on two major fronts — fundraising to cover a portion of the repair costs and lobbying state representatives in Sacramento to exert pressure on parks officials to allocate dollars to a repair project.

The parks department has recently secured a \$545,000 federal grant to be used toward a repair project, with a stipulation that states about 11 percent (about \$62,000) of the grant must be matched by an outside source.

SYRPA is trying to bridge the funding gap.

The organization has procured a \$10,000 grant from the California State Parks Foundation — another nonprofit created to provide financial assistance to the entire 270-park system — while garnering about \$20,000 through various fund-raising events.

SYRPA has pledged the \$30,000 to the effort, but a \$30,000 void remains.

Even if the \$62,000 match is reached in the near term, officials will still need to locate another \$500,000 to fully endow the project.

Despite remaining hurdles, both Anderson and Linkem expressed optimism that money can be found via community fundraising, further grant writing and/or allocations by the parks department from its existing budget.

Anderson said he has met with Assemblymen Brian Dahle and Jim Nielsen to articulate the importance of the project to the local community and has plans to meet with Anthony Jackson, the new director of state parks.

“We will continue our efforts with legislators,” Anderson said.

Caleb Dardick, president of the South Yuba River Citizens League, will also continue to stump in support of local parks.

“We’ve been involved in this issue ever since our parks appeared on the closure list and we will continue to mobilize the community,” Dardick said. “One of the things that makes South Yuba River State Park so unique and wonderful is the covered bridge.”

Anderson and Linkem also recently struck an agreement that will foster a short-term solution to more immediate issues.

SYRPA volunteers have been donating time at the Bridgeport Visitor Center for several years, serving as docents and filling gaps left by downstaffing at the parks.

“The volunteer hours spent in the visitor center have been given a value and matched by the state,” Anderson said.

State parks estimated the value of the volunteer hours at \$267,000 and have agreed to use the funds to perform a stabilization project. Stabilization will not address compromised structural elements, but will prevent further deterioration and/or a catastrophic collapse.

“That way, we don’t have to worry about a couple of heavy winters,” Linkem said. “We can rest easy.”

Dardick said the extensive hours SYRCL volunteers have dedicated at the state parks over the past two years should also be tabulated and added to the effort.

Linkem said the stabilization project is slated for November with a goal to begin environmental analysis and design work on the overarching repair project next spring.

The optimistic outlook calls for the repair project to start in the fall of 2014, but a more realistic schedule likely has a shovel in the ground in 2015, Linkem said.

If and when repairs are complete, pedestrians will once again be able to cross a bridge that once provided a vital connection for pioneers in the foothills hoping to steer their horse-drawn carriages to Virginia City, Nev., where the Comstock Lode was yielding unprecedented amounts of silver.

“(The bridge) was a key part of the Virginia Turnpike,” Anderson said. “It’s an element of our history that can’t be lost.”

Those interested in donating to the Save Our Bridge campaign can contact David Anderson at 530-432-2359 or send a check to P.O. Box 1658, Penn Valley, CA 95946 in care of “Save Our Bridge.”

To contact Staff Writer Matthew Renda, email mrenda@theunion.com or 530-477-4239.